
Transcript of Climate Change Podcast with Kurt Volker

September, 2007

Narrator:

This a USINFO issue update.

On September 27th and 28th, leaders of major economies will gather in Washington to discuss the mounting challenge of climate change. The meeting seeks agreement on the process that will be used to construct a new global framework for addressing climate change beyond 2012, which is when the Kyoto Protocol expires.

In addition, special attention will be placed on how major economies can cooperate closely with the private sector to accelerate the development and deployment of clean technologies. By joining together, developed nations and major developing economies, the U.S. advocates an inclusive approach to developing clean energy and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The Major Economies meeting is the latest in a long line of U.S. initiatives on climate change. Like other nations, the U.S. realizes the potential consequences of unchecked greenhouse gas emissions. Still, there are enduring myths that the United States does not care about climate change, or is ignorant of the problem facing the planet. This week's meeting will help to dispel that myth.

Kurt Volker is the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the State Department's Bureau of European Affairs. He sat down with us recently and explained why an approach that includes developed and developing nations is so important.

Kurt Volker:

Too much of the past seven or eight years has been characterized by divisiveness and argument; a lot of finger pointing; is it the Kyoto Protocol or is not the Kyoto Protocol and what does that mean? What this meeting has the potential to do is to get us beyond that definitively now as we look ahead. The storyline here has been Europe is the good guy and America's the bad guy. And the rest of the world doesn't even count. And what you find is that actually Europe makes up 20% of the world's emissions. 80% are happening someplace else. If you add the U.S. to that, you're still dealing with about 45% of the world's emissions. So the majority of what's going on out there is not the U.S.

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The Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. This week's meeting in Washington and other recent meetings have focused on what the future climate change policy will look like. Since the Kyoto Protocol was completed almost ten years ago, knowledge of climate change, its causes and impacts, as well as economic adjustments and the role of developing countries, have added substance to the debate.

Kyoto Protocol has a time period that runs from 2008 to 2012. A lot of countries now are starting to look at what happens after that. And the approach taken in Kyoto, one where you have a global cap and trade system that only applies to some countries and not to others, that's not an approach that's going to work past 2012. So we have to come up with something new. The other thing I would say about timelines and where we are is that we are now getting good data from the past six-seven years. We've seen reductions in greenhouse gas intensity in the U.S. of about eight and a half percent; reductions in Europe's greenhouse gas intensity of about four and a half percent. U.S. emissions from 2000-2005 went up by 1.6 percent. That's at a time when our economy grew by the size of Italy or our population grew by the size of Sweden and Denmark combined, so big growth, big population growth, very modest emissions growth. So what you see is that for the first time since Kyoto was signed, the U.S. and Europe are now looking out again and saying, hey – we're in roughly the same place. We see that we have to move in the future, and by the way, whatever we do, it isn't going to matter unless we can have the developing world adopt the same technologies so they have both continued rapid economic growth but no longer continued rapid emissions growth.

Developing and using clean technology is a key aspect of fighting climate change. Although many methods exist for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, true sustainable development will only come by changing how economies produce and use energy. Volker explains.

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How do you change your economy? You can either shrink your economy, or you can shift some of your economy overseas, or the third thing you can do is change the way your economy works. For the same level of economic output, or hopefully even more, you have fewer emissions. That's the way we're really going to make a change in the long term. And here the U.S. has been the biggest investor in this in the world. From the federal government about 37 billion dollars, from the private sector billions more. We're used to being a decentralized country. We're used to having a government that can act as a stimulus but can't control things. And that's what you're going to have to have when you look at changing the way the world produces economic output and greenhouse gas emissions. It's going to be the private sector that says, hey – if I can use less fuel and produce the same thing, I save money. When those dynamics kick in, then you'll really see changes in the global economy. That's the way this major economies meeting is set up as well. It's meant to be based on national plans or regional plans that are the basis of seeing how countries are trying to stimulate change in their own economies. Then you can add that up and point the way towards a global goal on emissions reductions.

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